

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

NAVIGATING THE SHORES:

TROUBLING NOTIONS OF THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

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Abstract

This article examines how graduate students in a semester-long research course, a capstone experience in a master's program in teaching and learning, came to redefine what counts as educational research. The students were challenged to conduct a research project, while also exploring how their ideas about teaching and research delimited their work. This inquiry revealed a central paradox in education research—that by calling for more teacher voice in research we may liberate teachers and students to do their work differently, while also perpetuating narrow colonial conceptions of what it means to be a teacher and conduct teacher research. The author argues that in order to decolonize teaching and research, students need opportunities to develop a political analysis that will help expose the contradictions that abound in schools, universities, and society.

Keywords: teacher research, teacher education, teacher voice, inquiry stance, indigenous epistemology, multigenre research, democratic education, colonial thinking, decolonizing schools

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS: WHAT'S WORTH KNOWING?

In her essay, “On Our Own Liberation,” Manulani Aluli Meyer (2003), Hawaiian scholar of indigenous epistemologies, notes that any discussion about epistemology “is a way to navigate the shores of what is worth knowing” (p. 125). She argues for the importance of questioning “acultural and thus apolitical assumptions in the art of teaching and the science of learning” (p. 124). Her insight—that teachers and teacher educators are always and already navigating the political shores of knowledge and knowing—points to a series of related questions about how educators come to define and delimit their work as teachers and researchers. Asking questions about the nature and purpose of our work can help begin a process for determining what is valued and taught in school and why. Meyer, exploring the important link between knowledge and identity, notes the following:

Hawaiians were never like the people who colonized us. If we wish to understand what is unique and special about who we are as cultural people, we will see that our building blocks of understanding, our epistemology, and thus our empirical relationship to experience is fundamentally different. (p. 125)

According to Meyer, educators would benefit from honoring other ways of knowing, doing, and being, in order to create opportunities for learning that resonate with marginalized students.

With an eye toward these ends, Meyer (2003) suggests that teachers and students need to stop asking, “How can we be more like them?” and, instead, ask, “Why do we want to be more like them?” By challenging our students to question, rather than uncritically accept, a Western (i.e., universal) system of official knowledge and value claims, we (i.e., aspiring and practicing teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers) can start to see our work differently. This means questioning why we teach and write about only certain things in schools and universities, while ignoring others (Kumashiro, 2015). Questioning the purpose of our work can help us (and our students) develop a more nuanced analysis of schools and society (Anyon, 2005;

Picower, 2012). We can begin this process by questioning why it has become so common for teacher research to focus on how to teach more efficiently or effectively. Why, for example, do we focus our efforts on how to improve classroom management or disciplinary procedures in an effort to attain higher scores on standardized examinations, rather than on ways to make our schools and communities more democratic, more equitable, more just, more inviting and intelligible to outsiders, and more sustainable (Cochran-Smith 2009; Heikkinen, de Jong, & Vanderlinde, 2016; Hountondji, 1992; Meyer, 2003; Yagelski, 2009; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001)?

Meyer's insights inspired me to redesign a course on teacher research at my institution in order to address such questions. I came to this work with an understanding that many of our schools and universities teach us to reproduce colonial practices, where knowledges, methodologies, and curricula are often imported to classrooms and where students and local communities have little or no say in what, how, or why, these things are being taught (Charest, 2017; Hountondji, 1992; Lipman, 2004; Wa Thiong'o, 1986; Scott, 1998;). In a similar way, graduate students in schools and colleges of education are often encouraged to conduct capstone practitioner research projects where "practitioner research may be understood as finding new knowledge about 'performing, doing' e.g., practices" (Heikkinen et al., 2016, p. 5) related to the technical (or procedural) aspects of teaching more efficiently (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). For example, a teacher hoping to find a way to teach more effectively might conduct research on things like the value of a specific assessment practice, the tone of voice used by a teacher to improve classroom management, how to give directions in the most efficient way possible, or ways to encourage a growth mindset. While it may seem logical or necessary for a teacher to explore these technical aspects of teaching, what goes unexamined here are questions about what is being taught and why.

This article explores how graduate students in my course came to see and define themselves as teachers and what such ideas meant for how they understood education and research. The course was designed to allow students to identify, discuss, and potentially challenge

colonial practices, as well as open new areas for inquiry (Anyon, 2005; Charest, 2017; Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2009; Heikkinen et al., 2016; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Students were asked to read a range of works¹ exploring what our ways of knowing say about our ways of doing and being. We further examined these ideas by conducting research through multiple genres, as a way to experience and practice how different ways of knowing shape our understandings of the world.

Many of the course readings explored why colonial practices in schools often fail to engage our students. For example, Meyer (2003) declares that “Hawaiians were never like the people who colonized us” and suggests that “how one knows, indeed, what one prioritizes with regard to this knowing, ends up being the stuffing of identity” (p.125). This idea—that how one knows is inextricably linked to how one sees, and how one understands oneself in the world—formed the core of our inquiry throughout the course. I not only wanted students to see how certain practices in schools in universities compel specific ways of knowing, but also how these practices can perpetuate and constrain ways of being.

Like many classes I have taught over the years, this course didn’t go exactly the way that I had planned. During our first meeting, as I attempted to describe what we would be doing and why, several students made it clear that they were uncomfortable with the direction we were heading. One student who was brave enough to speak out began by suggesting that I was undermining what she described as “their right to conduct legitimate academic research.” She (like many of her peers) already had a research topic and a plan in mind. Now she just wanted to implement her project the way she had imagined it in a previous course. She worried aloud about the value of exploring different genres, about including the arts, about questioning the idea of research and critiquing particular research practices.

¹ We read works by many of the scholars cited in this piece, including the following: Ayers, 2006; Charest, 2017; Hountondji, 1992; Kumashiro, 2015; Lipman, 2004; Marsh, 2011; Simpson, 2012; Scott, 1998; Wa Thiong’o, 1986. I highlight Meyer’s work in this introduction because it best captures for me how our ideas about knowledge are bound up in our notions of identity and practice.

I sympathized with her, even if I was briefly bewildered by her resistance to what I thought were the more interesting and humanizing possibilities of the research project I was proposing. However, what interested me most about that first day was why the students felt so committed to doing a traditional teacher research project. I wanted to know what it was that the students thought they were resisting and why.

THE MAKING OF PROFESSIONAL TEACHERS

In their comparative study, “Making Teachers Accountable: The Terrors and Pleasures of Performativity,” Jessica Holloway and Jory Brass (2017) explain how the education reforms of the past several decades, from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to the Race to the Top Fund of 2009 (RTTT), have fundamentally changed the way aspiring teachers see themselves and understand their work as teachers. Holloway and Brass (2017) note that teachers who entered the profession, or were already teaching, during the implementation of the NCLB reforms understood the “standards-based managerialism as bureaucratic impositions that undermined teacher professionalism with a clerical focus that paradoxically intensified and reduced teachers’ work” (p. 367).

These teachers, the first group to encounter NCLB reforms in their schools, understood the work of teaching in ways that were consistent with the more interpretive research framework that Dewey (1938), and others since, have supported (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Holloway and Brass (2017) note that for these teachers, “their knowledge of themselves as good teachers was deeply contextual and marked by relationships, experiences and social interactions that supported students’ autonomy and growth” (p. 367). Teaching for this generation of teachers was situated, contextual, and connected to social and political realities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The teacher as professional was not an either/or proposition that rejected or supported a specific set of practices; rather, it was a rejection of the idea that “good” teaching could ever be definitively identified as something easily reproduced and transferred from one teaching context to the next.

Other researchers note (Gaches, 2018; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Schultz, & Dover, 2017), however, that teachers who themselves (as students) have been subjected to NCLB and related reforms, now understand their work almost exclusively in terms of process and product. These teachers have been created by what Holloway and Brass (2017) call “the political rationalities and technologies of reforms that seek to influence how educators know and conduct themselves as teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers” (p. 362). For these newer teachers, the foundational ideas of teacher as researcher, teacher as learned practitioner, and teacher as professional have taken on new meanings and, subsequently, reshaped teacher work and research. As Gaches (2018) notes, “a common theme...is that all teachers will focus their efforts on their student charges attaining appropriate mandated test scores indicative of attainment of uniform standards through standardized curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 646). It is this instrumentalist logic that now informs the way that many teachers understand themselves and the goals of their work (and research) in schools.

New teachers see things like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the use of value-added measures for evaluating teachers as natural and normal, or inevitable, parts of schooling (Ayers, 20006; Au, 2013; Charest, 2017; Gaches, 2018; Giroux, 2011; Kumashiro, 2015; Holloway & Brass, 2017). This testing and accountability apparatus can be understood to function in this way:

[it] provides the metrics against which teachers can measure themselves, situating them within perpetual states of comparison against their peers and former selves to be more ‘effective’ and ‘excellent’ (Ball 2015). Collegiality is replaced with competition, and autonomy is replaced with bounded (and calculable) expectations, providing the means through which teachers (and their supervisors) can know their ranks relative to their peers. This process not only changes the teacher’s behavior, but it also changes the teacher. (Holloway & Brass, 2017, p. 363)

Teachers, transformed by the new technologies of reform, have changed the way they see their work in classrooms. The new metrics for evaluating teachers appeal to common sense, because how else

will teachers know they have succeeded without a set of external “scientifically” neutral metrics to guide them? The idea of “success” in teaching comes to be understood through individual comparisons to and competition with one’s colleagues down the hall, or at the schools across town, where little or no attention is paid to the circumstances surrounding one’s so-called “success” in these spaces, or the value of one’s work for the public good (Ayers, 2006; Charest & Sjostrom, 2019; Giroux, 2011; Hountondji, 1992; Simpson, 2014).

The idea of the teacher as reflective practitioner (which is often how one defines the teacher as professional) can be understood in a new way: as the teacher who internalizes a scientific rationality and perpetuates colonial thinking and practices in order to improve their teaching. The discourse of open and free teacher and student inquiry that explores questions of justice, the public good, or engagement with systems of power that produce inequities in society, are absent from this idea of the teacher as professional and the teacher as reflective practitioner. Holloway and Brass (2017) note that for today’s teachers “the standards and testing apparatus could become the ‘inner’ knowledge that structured their fields of possible thought and action and, thus, their sense of themselves as subjects, or actors” (p. 378).

It was, I contend, with this “inner” knowledge that students entered my graduate class; this new way of understanding teaching led many students to believe that valid teacher research needed to emulate “science” as they understood it (i.e., research that produced a set of measurable data on pedagogy and student outcomes). This notion of teacher research structured “their fields of possible thought and action” (Holloway & Brass, 2017, p. 378) and revealed suitable topics or questions for teacher research, almost all of which focused on assessment, classroom management, or content delivery in some way. Without an understanding of how injustice operates, teachers are likely to adhere to, accept, and reproduce the colonial logic of the testing and accountability regime they have experienced as students and encounter again as teachers (Picower, 2012).

Teacher research, for many of the students entering my course, was simply seen as an extension of the systems that helped define and delimit the work of teaching as classroom-based, apolitical,

and process-product oriented. As Holloway and Brass (2017) note, “standards and accountability regimes sought to produce good teachers who willingly aligned their work with externally defined standards and welcomed self-surveillance paperwork that fed schools’ performance monitoring systems” (p. 369). Good teaching, for these teachers, is not about participating in civic debate (or questioning district mandates) about what teachers and schools were being asked to do (or asking who gets to decide such things); rather, it was about refining and reflecting upon one’s practice in order to teach (i.e., deliver content) more effectively and efficiently within the given system.

Jean Anyon (2005) explains that “the paradigm within which almost all education research has occurred places the investigative focus on characteristics of schools (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, curriculum, pedagogy)” (p. 21), rather than on the social structures and public and educational policies that shape (and often limit) what students can do in schools. These paradigms operate through institutions and have powerful effects on how we understand ourselves (Althusser, 1971). Even as I attempt to write this piece against formulaic notions of what research should look like, I find myself falling back into the well-worn grooves of many of our accepted practices. As Harlep and Bute (2017) remind us, education research often:

conceals itself behind turbo-charged methodologies, excessive citations, APA formatting, and a plethora of quotations from academic ‘experts.’ What is most revealing of such a practice is what Albert Einstein once said, ‘We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.’ (p. 4)

Given these realities, how do we make time and space to pause and ask ourselves why we are doing what we are doing, or question what we have been told about how to do our work?

TEACHER RESEARCH: THE PARADOX OF “TEACHER VOICE”

Educational research has its roots in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, and it is worth examining how ideas about educational research have evolved in the last several decades. These

changes can help us understand how teacher research and the work of teacher researchers has come to be understood by many practitioners as classroom and pedagogy focused, rather than an investigation and analysis of the social, political, and economic realities that shape the lives of students and their experiences in schools (Anyon, 2005).

Prevailing ideas of the teacher as researcher can be linked to other foundational ideas that inform teacher preparation programs and teacher identities, including the idea of the teacher as professional and the teacher as learned practitioner (Creswell, 2012; Kumashiro, 2015; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). What has been less rigorously interrogated about teacher research, however, is how new teachers come to understand themselves as teachers through ideas about research. As Zeichner and Noffke (2001) note, practitioner research needs to include “the clarification of assumptions about education and the recognition of contradictions” that abound in this work (p. 307). Additionally, while teachers and teacher educators tend to accept the importance of teacher research and the identity of the teacher as researcher, we do not often make time to examine how these identities are formed, or how they change.

The work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1990), authors who have been writing about teacher research for several decades, provides an interesting perspective on how ideas about teacher research have evolved. In their article, “Research on Teaching and Teacher Research: The Issues That Divide,” Cochran-Smith and Lytle sketch out two major themes in the evolution of educational research in order to call attention to the ways that educational research has historically ignored or marginalized teacher voice. For Cochran-Smith and Lytle, the major divide between educational researchers can be understood as a division between process-product research and interpretive research.² The authors define process-product research as a way of “exploring effective teaching by correlating particular

² While these categories are quite useful for the purposes of this article, it is important to note that across the division between interpretative and process/product approaches there exists a range of research methodologies for designing and conducting research (e.g., action research, self-study, narrative inquiry, quantitative and statistical studies, etc.).

processes, or teacher behaviors, with particular products, usually defined as student achievement as measured by standardized tests” (p. 2). The process-product research orientation not only sets the research agenda, it also ends up defining what educators should know and be able to do.

Interpretive research, on the other hand, is explained by Cochran Smith & Lytle (1990) in the following way: Research from these perspectives presumes that teaching is a highly complex, context-specific, interactive activity in which differences across classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important. (p. 3)

Interpretive research, then, points to a different understanding of what teachers should know and be able to do and leaves open the possibility for studying phenomena outside the classroom that may impact what happens inside. The authors note that because neither perspective has done enough to include the voices of teachers, the solution to the problems in educational research is including more teacher voice:

What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching, therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classrooms. (p. 2)

Almost three decades after the publication of their article, the ideas that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) identify at the core of the historical division between teacher research and research on teaching are still quite relevant. However, today they are relevant for different reasons. In 1990, the problem was that aspiring and practicing teachers did not see the applicability in what they were being taught by university-based education courses to their experiences of teaching and learning; these teachers did not see their concerns (or their voices) reflected in the research on teaching. Today, however, the interpretive frame that teachers use to “understand and improve their own classrooms” has come to mean something very specific (and something quite different): an obsession with practical strategies (commonly referred to as “best practices”) to improve student

outcomes (as measured by standardized examinations) (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009; Gaches, 2018; Holloway & Brass, 2017).

What if the problem today isn't so much the absence of teacher voice, but rather how the "official knowledge base for teaching" has shaped the voices of our new and aspiring teachers? In other words, the resistance that I encountered at the start of my course on teacher research could be described as a new type of discontinuity, but one that functioned in exactly the same way as it did for teachers in 1990, only this time for different reasons. Teachers in my class had come to see good teaching (and, thus, good teacher research) through a new framework—as something that mapped onto established ideas about standards, accountability, efficiency, official knowledge, and technical skills connected to a set of best practices.

It may seem intuitive to suggest, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle do, that more teacher voice is needed in teacher research. It is less clear, however, what happens when teachers, whose voices we presumably seek to include in directing and contributing to research and policy, have internalized a dominant, colonial, process-product research paradigm. Additionally, what happens when this dominant research paradigm is one that ignores the social, political, and economic realities of students and communities in the name of "practical" (and, ostensibly apolitical, neutral, and scientific) classroom-based "best practices" that focus exclusively on individual behaviors and performances that can be measured, counted, and reproduced across very different contexts?

TROUBLING THE COURSE ON TEACHER RESEARCH: EXPLORING WAYS OF KNOWING

One of the goals of my semester long course was to unsettle ideas about how we gathered, interpreted, and presented data, and for what purposes. In the syllabus, I noted that we would "expand current notions of what counts as knowledge and research to include a variety of genres, as well as different ways of knowing and doing." I wanted the students to consider the emancipatory power of seeking out new ways to conduct research and to do so by first identifying topics and questions that they cared deeply about exploring, rather than focusing

exclusively on their classroom practice and pedagogy (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Heikkinen et al., 2016; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Beginning with my students' concerns and interests was a way to intentionally link school, home, and community cultures and to promote the idea that the research project could have relevance beyond the school-based setting. Once students settled on a topic, I asked them to conduct research through multiple genres (e.g., song, dance, poetry, story, photography, comic, interview, etc.) and to reflect on how genre shapes the way we see and understand (Mack, 2015; Romano, 2000).

The multigenre research project (MGRP) can be best understood, according to Tom Romano (2000), as follows:

A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author's. (pp. i-xi)

Taken together, these ideas pointed toward the overarching goal of the course, which was to examine how alternative ways of conducting research might be used to interrogate, challenge, and disrupt colonial practices in schools and universities. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note, I wanted students to acknowledge that "differences across classrooms, schools, and communities are critically important" (p. 3).

While this approach to research does not guarantee that students will challenge or resist colonial practices, it does provide a framework for exploring and reflecting upon different ways of seeing, knowing, being, and doing. Another significant goal related to the aims listed above was that students in the course, all of whom taught different subjects at different levels, from kindergarten to high school mathematics, would leave the class at the end of the semester with new ideas about how to conduct inquiry-based projects with their own students. This new model for inquiry would allow K-12 teachers

to support K-12 students to demonstrate learning in new ways and intentionally connect their home and community cultures with the work they did in schools. Finally, I wanted my students to find ways to nurture and support their own curiosity and creativity—to see themselves as authors, creators, and intellectuals capable of critiquing systems, embracing difference, and producing new knowledge—so that they would be ready to do the same with their future students.

We began the course by examining a series of questions about research that helped us frame our subsequent inquiry together, some which I list here:

1. Where do our ideas about research and researchers come from?
2. How do our ideas about “experts” shape how and what teachers and teacher educators do and why?
3. How do our ideas about what “counts” as research inform what we can or cannot research?
4. Can we expand our ideas about research to include questions about what is being taught, where content comes from, and whose interest it serves?
5. Could teacher research include more political questions related to the health and well-being of students, teachers, and communities?
6. Can we expand our ideas about research and knowledge production to include alternative ways of knowing, doing, and being?

These questions served as a guide throughout the course—a course historically taught in a way that first described different approaches to and the necessary steps for conducting research before asking students to design and complete a classroom-based action research project of their own (Creswell, 2012; Moulding & Hadley, 2010). In the redesigned course, an important requirement for the inquiry project was that students would reflect on the questions above as they went about their research. These requirements gave rise to questions and discussions about methodology, data collection, theoretical

frameworks, etc. I also invited students to consider questions related to injustices that they had observed in schools or experienced in their lives.

I wanted to see what could happen when graduate students were liberated from institutional and disciplinary constraints to ask questions about and then conduct research on a topic or issue they had chosen. I also wanted students to experience the power of examining their question or topic through the lens of more creative genres like poetry, dance, and visual arts. I wanted, as William Ayers (2006) suggests, “to champion the idea that educational researchers can gain sustenance and perspective by drawing on the humanities” (p. 81), as a way to help us see and know differently. The humanities, understood here in the broadest possible terms, might include aspects and traditions of marginalized cultures and communities that students found important or worth exploring.

In designing the research project, I wondered if it was possible (or desirable) to delink teacher research in our class from an explicit concern with classroom practice and pedagogy? I wondered if students would be able or willing to look at the way their work as teachers connected to their everyday experiences? For example, would students be willing to conduct research exploring gender, race, class, or issues related to global warming or growing economic inequality? The purpose of our research was not simply to reproduce the prevailing orthodoxies in schools and universities, but rather to pose questions about who such practices served and why we might (or might not) want to emulate them.

When a student in the class asked, “Does our research topic have to be education related?” it started a conversation about whether or not it was possible for a research question, topic, or issue to be construed as having no educational value (or being entirely unrelated to educational goals). This led to other questions about the nature of knowledge and knowing, as well as the differences between practical, local, or applied knowledge, empirical research, and more theoretical, or interpretive frames for knowing. Another student asked a question about the possibility of formatting the final research project without explicitly calling attention to a theoretical framework; another student wanted to

know what it meant to study issues that some considered outside the purview of teacher research.

The student questions crystalized important ideas about what many of us think education is supposed to be and do. They also demonstrated how much the students had internalized Western ideas about knowledge and academic learning (understood as universal and uncontested), as well as how much the students had learned to reject anything that seemed to fall outside of those boundaries. One student remarked, notably, that it felt like “cheating” to be doing research on something that she chose to learn more about. Students in the course had very clear ideas about what counted as school-based research, which means they also had equally clear notions about the things they believed they shouldn’t be doing in graduate school (i.e., connecting to home and community cultures). As Heikkinen, de Jong, and Vanderlinde (2016) note, we were traveling “outside of academic terrain...somewhere on the borderline between ‘academics’ and ‘practitioners’” (p. 3), and this space was deeply uncomfortable for many students in the course.

For many students in the course, the idea of teacher research (understood here as a practitioner action research project investigating a classroom-based practice or issue) had come to be seen as settled dogma: something every teacher learned to do in a similar way and for similar reasons (i.e., collecting data in the classroom to improve one’s teaching practice and reporting out findings, methods, etc.). My goal, however, was to unsettle what seemed settled and encourage students to try to see differently—to see themselves as “deviant academics and non-expert citizens, who are well informed, but who have not been ‘socialized’ into believing and behaving in self-limiting ways” (Hartlep & Bute, 2017, p. 4). I was simultaneously asking these teachers to bring their voices into their research, while analyzing and critiquing how their voices had been shaped and limited by their experiences.

EXPOSING CONTRADICTIONS: WHY DO WE WANT TO BE MORE LIKE THEM?

I began my course by asking students to question the nature and purpose of research and the role of research in the work of teachers.

Many students in the course resisted my initial call to embrace an alternative vision of what research could be and do. However, as we made our way through the semester, more students came to see themselves and their work differently. Even so, many of them struggled to find ways to bring their projects together, to give them some coherence, and to do their work in ways that pushed back against traditional notions of teacher research. It was precisely because of this struggle, however, that students were able to construct meaning and assign value to their inquiries. Some students continued to question whether or not their projects met any external standard for academic rigor, while others seemed unable to separate their research from their classroom work. These challenges provided opportunities for students to discuss what they meant by academic rigor and how spaces outside of schools and classrooms could function as legitimate sites of inquiry and learning.

To give you a sense of the scope of the work, as well as the limits of our successes, I share several brief sketches of research projects that came out of this class. These projects helped students identify some of the contradictions that emerged from our reflections on our collective work.

The Disability Project—For this project, a woman in the class explored ideas about the history of disabilities in the US, including how disability had been defined through the legal and educational systems and how such things affected students in schools. She brought in her family as part of her final presentation; each of her children (all identified by schools as students with special needs) got up in front of the class and talked about their struggles in school and then demonstrated their incredible abilities. These family members talked about their difficulty in getting school systems to recognize them for their strengths and interests rather than their so-called deficiencies. One child performed an original song, and another child showed us his artwork. The oldest child talked about his work as an actor and his involvement in theater arts.

The New Teacher Project—For this project, a young woman examined research on how new teachers found ways to sustain

their enthusiasm and build community with other teachers through the challenges of the first years of teaching. She wanted to better understand why so many teachers left in the first five years, but also what kept some teachers going, despite the challenges of the job. Through interviews with local teachers and site visits to schools, she not only discovered a lack of existing support systems for new and more experience teachers, but she worked with some of the teachers she met to identify needed supports, including meditation practices, organized social activities, and permission to make time to do things outside of school that did not explicitly relate to teaching, grading, or other professional responsibilities. This student developed a “yearbook” for new teachers that included interviews, reflections, and research.

The Travel Project—For this project, a young man researched the benefits of travel and what it had meant to him in his life. He talked about growing up in a low-income community without a father and how a family friend had taken him under his wing. One of the things this neighbor did was introduce the young man to the power of travel and cross-cultural exchanges. These experiences changed the way the young man understood the world, and he began to ask why there were not more truly immersive cross-cultural experiences for low-income students at his school. His goal was to bring this type of learning experience to his future students. He developed and presented his work as a travel journal.

The Homework Project—For this project, a woman in the class examined the value of homework for young children. She read and analyzed current research on the subject. She also talked about how the project was the result of her struggles to get her own children to sit and do homework. For years, she fought with her youngest daughter. She wanted to know why teachers kept assigning so much homework, even though the research she found, in most cases, didn’t support doing so. She shared her stories and her daughter’s stories. She created a pamphlet that she was using to encourage her colleagues to reconsider the amount of homework they assigned and why.

Toward the end of the course we began to generate more questions about the work that we had done together, as well as what it meant for our continuing practice. From there, we explored how we had come to see teaching and learning in new ways, as well as how willing or unwilling we had been to embrace new ideas.

By allowing students to begin their research looking inward at who they were and what they cared about, the research projects eventually turned outward and began engaging some (but not all) of the questions about research identified at the start of this piece. From this inward-to-outward directed research—research that tried to explicitly link school, home, and community cultures—we developed the beginnings of a political analysis that helped us identify contradictions in our work as teachers and researchers. While I was asking teachers to find their voices and connect with their interests and concerns, I was also challenging them to examine what had shaped their voices and how they might do their work differently.

For example, we determined that when teacher voice is shaped by institutional mandates and norms, it often points toward narrowly focused research on classroom practice and pedagogy. Whereas when teacher voice emerges from an analysis of the social, political, and economic dimensions of teaching and education, different ways of doing and discussing our work arise. This reciprocal process of questioning and analyzing throughout the semester helped us look at the practices that had become so natural and normal in schools and universities that imagining alternatives seemed almost impossible. By exploring the contradictions in our own work and then interrogating some of the colonial practices we had unknowingly embraced, we began a process of decolonizing our educational spaces.

To paraphrase George Jackson (1970) in *Soledad Brother*, it was important for us not only to identify the possibilities and contradictions, but also to expose them within our institutions and our research. Below are eight of the contradictions that we identified during the course, each of which has the potential to open new possibilities in our schools and universities:

1. We say we value creativity and innovation while also making appeals to traditions that insist there is a “right” way to do or know things.
2. We see academic research as more valid than experiential, community, or home learning, but also say that we want students to feel that their home and community cultures are valued in school (That is, we don’t often allow students to connect these spaces through guided or sustained inquiry).
3. We say that we value different learning styles, but we don’t often provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in alternative ways—we mostly stick to teaching academic argument or academic ways of knowing and doing.
4. We say we value diversity, but we are inclined only to allow for diverse ways of knowing, learning, doing, or being that can be contained within the existing framework of what we call school.
5. We say we value democracy and choice, but there is very little democracy or choice in practice or in the production of knowledges in these institutions.
6. We present scientific knowledge as “truth” but often fail to acknowledge the limitations of this knowledge to answer deeper questions about human existence and spirituality.
7. We say that we all learn at different rates and in different contexts, but we structure many of our learning environments around the opposite premise.
8. We say that we value student and teacher voices, but often we do not provide time or space for teachers and students to examine how our voices are shaped, how they may perpetuate colonial practices, or how they might point toward different ways of knowing, doing, and being.

Our next step was to ask ourselves what we might imagine if we took these contradictions and questions seriously. What would these ideas mean for each of us in our lives? Would we take more risks, introduce new ways of knowing, or allow for different ways of being?

Would we challenge ourselves to be more curious? More creative? Would we inspire new voyages with our students and colleagues? How would these questions lead us to reshape our classrooms and schools? What would it mean for our curriculum or our communities?

FINAL REFLECTIONS: BECOMING OURSELVES

By the end of the course, many students had come to embrace (or at least see the importance of) different ideas about research and inquiry. Despite this, I was left wondering what the student projects had taught us. What had we learned about the limitations and the possibilities of our work as teachers and teacher educators attempting to teach research and inquiry in ways that humanized students? Below I share a few student responses from an anonymous survey that I sent out a few weeks after the class ended:

I anticipated finding a specific answer to a specific question. Instead, I asked numerous questions and ended up with some answers, but mostly more questions.

I often thought of research as typical long papers and lots of cited sources. This course showed me how research can manifest in many different ways. I really liked seeing everyone's project and how everyone completed their project in their own unique way.

I started looking at research not just as a collection of data, but a way to deepen personal understanding of a topic on multiple levels.

It challenged my thinking about the way we do research and learning. It was not easy, [and] it was an uncomfortable stretch, but I really enjoyed it, because I was researching something I was truly passionate about, not just something I HAD to do.

Before this course, the word research scared me. I felt like I would have to sit behind a computer screen for hours researching a boring topic. I thought I would have to write a 30+ page paper, and it terrified me. After taking this course, I learned that research can and should be exciting, fun, and we can bring our passion.

As the student comments show, ideas about research shape the way we understand our work as teachers, and our ideas about teaching shape our research. When we conceptualize the teacher as

a professional subject (as opposed to an engaged political one), we also begin a process of determining what is worth knowing, doing, and being. Teachers are encouraged (or made) to see research as an extension of their professional identity—an identity often shaped by their experiences in schools and universities.

Teacher identities, teacher work, and teacher research are inextricably linked. Until we begin to see and understand our work differently—to urge voyages to new shores and to conceptualize the teacher as a political agent working against oppression and for the public good—new teachers will continue to see themselves and their work through the dominant frames of external standards, testing regimes, scientific data, and accountability that puts them in competition with themselves and others. In my course, we asked questions about the value and limitations of standards, about the purposes of schools and the role of teachers, and we sought to see schools as spaces connected to and shaped by the economic, political, and social realities of our communities.

Meyer (2003) suggests that the conversation about what is worth knowing and doing “is particularly important as we enter the new millennium where information will no longer be synonymous with knowledge, but rather how that information helps us maintain our sense of community in the daily chaos of access and information overload” (p. 125). We will need to look carefully at how we build and define our communities. We will need to ask questions about how current definitions of academic success serve very particular interests that may directly conflict with the interests we share—interests like creating more just and sustainable communities. We will also need to take intentional steps to authorize ourselves (rather than waiting for others to tell us what to do) to work with students in ways that encourage all of us to pursue inquiries that resist colonial practices and have meaning to us in our work in schools, universities, and communities. As Freire (1972) reminds us, this work is deeply contextual, relational, and participatory, but also necessary for our democracy to thrive. He notes:

The more people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the

people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy. (p. 145)

Our classrooms in schools and universities have the potential to be sites of struggle, connection, liberation, and creativity, where we find ways to encourage and support differences while working toward creating more justice, more democracy, and more equity. To do this work, however, all of us must push ourselves away from the shores of the familiar to chart new pathways for ourselves.

As James C. Scott (2012) wrote in *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, “the great emancipatory gains for human freedom have not been the result of orderly, institutional procedures but of disorderly, unpredictable, spontaneous action cracking open the social order from below” (p. 141). My hope is that this extended reflection on my own efforts to reconsider a course on teacher research might lead others to see and to do their work differently, unpredictably, and spontaneously, so that each of us might begin to crack open the social order in whatever space we find ourselves.

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